

VZCZCXR07185
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHML #4553/01 3060912
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 020912Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3734
INFO RUEHZS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004553

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV KISL KPAO RP
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S OUTREACH TO MUSLIM AUDIENCES IN MARAWI CITY,
MINDANAO

¶1. Summary. During an October 26 visit to "The Islamic City of Marawi," the Ambassador and senior Embassy officials emphasized the U.S.-Philippine partnership in promoting peace and prosperity in Muslim Mindanao in an address to a Muslim Women's conference on the environment, a radio interview, a luncheon meeting with local leaders, a discussion with students at Mindanao State University, and stops at USG assistance projects. Local residents warmly welcomed the Embassy delegation, called for a more direct U.S. role in the Mindanao peace process, and reiterated that Mindanao's Muslim population did not support terrorism. End summary.

THE ISLAMIC CITY OF MARAWI

¶2. The Islamic City of Marawi is the capital of the province of Lanao del Sur, with a population that is 92% Muslim, numerous mosques and madrassahs, and nearly 70 Islamic congregations, each under the leadership of an Imam. Arabic is widely spoken, and many men and virtually all women wear some manner of head covering, although female attire runs the gamut from full chador to blue jeans. Marawi is the largest of many towns and villages on the shores of Lake Lanao, all of which depend upon it for a great deal of their food and transportation, as well as most of their electric power. Local residents enthusiastically welcomed the Ambassador and senior Embassy officials, including the head of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines, and eagerly sought U.S.-Philippine flag pins and other Embassy souvenir items.

MUSLIM WOMEN FOCUS ON ENVIRONMENT

¶3. At the invitation of the Philippine Muslim Women Council, the Ambassador delivered a keynote address to its Conference on the Environmental Protection of Lake Lanao, attended by at least two hundred women and men. Participants ranged from colorful abaya-clad dowagers to Muslim Girl Scouts to representatives of the Chamber of Commerce to military commanders in combat fatigues. The Ambassador's remarks focused on the Islamic tradition of respect for the natural environment, the role of women in society, and the trans-gender, trans-national interest in promoting economic development. The Ambassador wore a headscarf, which had been presented upon her entry to the conference, and her speech was interrupted by periodic applause. Numerous attendees expressed their delight at the Ambassador's attendance and her display of respect for their culture and their cause. There was a spirited clamor for photographs and private conversations at the conclusion of her remarks.

¶4. The Ambassador then gave an interview to DXSO Radyo Ng Bayan ("People's Radio"), operated by the Philippine Broadcast Service. She emphasized USG interest in promoting the peace process and economic development in Mindanao through education. The Ambassador commented on the positive nature of the reception extended by the people of Marawi, and noted that the atmosphere of mutual respect was consistent with U.S. traditions of tolerance, acceptance of

diverse religious beliefs, and commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict.

LUNCH WITH LOCAL LEADERS

¶ 15. Mayor Solitario Ali hosted a lunch at his home on the shore of Lake Lanao for the Ambassador and about 30 top officials of the local government and prominent leaders of the academic and religious communities. Mayor Ali (who is also President of the Muslim League of Cities, a former commander of the Moro National Liberation Front, and a member of the Ulama League), described the joint efforts of the Ulama League and Catholic Bishops to support the peace process is attempting to work with Catholic leaders on the peace initiative. Both Mayor Ali and former Mayor Aleem Mahid Mutilan (also a three-time provincial governor and founder and president of the Ulama League) called for a more direct U.S. role in the peace process in Mindanao. They assured the Ambassador that Marawi City was committed to peace and its residents rejected violence and terrorism. The Ambassador reiterated the U.S. commitment to the peace process, U.S. willingness to engage more directly if the negotiating parties so requested, and promised continued U.S. support and assistance for peace and prosperity.

¶ 16. In a separate meeting, Colonel Rodrigo Alivio of the First Philippine Marine Brigade confirmed excellent collaboration with JSTOF-P, and underscored the commitment of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in keeping the 150 miles of road between Marawi City and Cotabato City open for safe transit. The Ambassador expressed appreciation for the AFP's role in combating terrorism and improving safety for local residents.

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MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSTIY

¶ 17. MSU Marawi's emphasis is on building bridges between Islam and Christianity, while maintaining a strong Muslim cultural and religious identity. The Embassy established an American Studies Resource Center at MSU in 1998 to provide current information about the U.S. to students, faculty, government officials, and private sector professionals. The Ambassador engaged in an animated dialogue with 25 students from the departments of Political Science, Humanities, English, and Law. Students welcomed the Ambassador's characterization of the U.S. policy as one of partnership and encouragement for the peace process. The Ambassador also visited MSU's Peace Center as well as its Center for Women Studies, where USG-provided sewing machines helped in providing livelihood training and creation of textile handicrafts.

USG ASSISTANCE PROJECTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

¶ 18. The Ambassador visited the ruins of Amai Pakpak Medical Center (originally a U.S. Army barracks but which became the Lanao Public Hospital in 1913), which had been completely destroyed by fire the week before. Addressing over 100 staff members, the Ambassador congratulated them on their accomplishments in providing healthcare to the Lake Lanao region, expressed condolences for the loss of a critically important institution, reiterated the USG commitment to public health in the Philippines, and announced the arrival of a JSTOF-P MEDCAP unit with medicines and a surgical unit on October 27, as well as the imminent delivery of a new ambulance donated by the U.S.-based "3P Foundation." The local media gave extensive coverage to this news.

¶ 19. Welcomed by rows of U.S. flag waving students, the Ambassador also visited Jamiatu Muslim Mindanao High School, a madrassah, where USAID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connectivity program had provided a wireless broadband internet connection, 10 computers with

software, 3 webcams, a printer, e-books, and other resource materials. School administrators expressed thanks for the provision of otherwise unobtainable computer equipment. The female president of the student body (clad like all the girls in a tightly wrapped black headscarf) revealed that her longtime dream to travel the world had at last been realized thanks to access to the internet. Students and faculty alike expressed hunger for contact with the outside world and gratitude for the USG assistance. The Ambassador conveyed her satisfaction at seeing the youth of Marawi benefit from computer learning and internet access, and challenged them to take responsibility for the future of their nation.

¶10. In nearby Iligan City, the Ambassador attended the 50th anniversary of the founding of the First Valley Bank, supported for the past seven years by USAID's Micro-enterprise Access to Banking Services program. The bank's president, its first loan clients, a number of successful micro-entrepreneurs, and the mayor (who just returned from a successful International Visitor program to the U.S.) extended warm thanks. The Ambassador congratulated USAID, the bank, and its clients on their mutual successes, highlighted their significant contributions to the economic development of the region, and underscored the importance of private initiative and enterprise.

COMMENT

¶11. The Ambassador's trip to Marawi City and vicinity revealed high levels of interest in and support for USG activities in Mindanao, an appreciation of U.S. respect for religious diversity, and a remarkable affection for American culture. Muslim residents warmly welcomed the message of a U.S.-Philippine partnership for peace and prosperity in Muslim Mindanao, and were adamant in distancing themselves from the ideology of radical Islam and terrorism.

KENNEY